Calauit Island: From Eden to paradise lost

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AFP file photo

Like Noah and the biblical ark, a boatload of animals was shipped from Africa to remote Calauit Island in the Philippines in the 1970s supposedly to save them from extinction.

The descendants of these animals—20 giraffes, along with dozens of zebra and antelope—are now among the most intriguing legacies of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos.

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The animals were brought to the tiny island where, under a Marcos decree, the locals were moved elsewhere to make way for the strange new inhabitants. Also, the bamboo forests on the island were cleared so the lowlands resembled the savannahs of Kenya.

Today just over 100 African animals—roughly the same number as the original batch—roam Calauit, one of the many islands comprising the province of Palawan.

ADVERTISING

Glimpse of Africa

The island is being promoted to tourists, where the animals and their habitation provide a glimpse of Africa in a remarkable tropical setting.

Visitors who make the trek to Calauit in northern Palawan—about 300 kilometers southeast of Manila—have the unique chance to sleep in an open-walled gazebo and wake to giraffes and zebra grazing just a few meters away.

“This has been an amazing experience, we’d never seen giraffes,” said Gleng Buele, 25, a nurse from Manila who, with three friends, flew to a rural airport, drove three hours on rough roads and took a boat to reach Calauit.

But, like so many tales surrounding Marcos and his 20-year rule that ended with the Edsa People Power Revolution in 1986, the official account of the African animals is at odds with reality.

The true story was that Marcos and his friends wanted to start a tourism business, according to Tony Parkinson, an Englishman who ran an animal “translocation” venture for zoos from Kenya in the 1970s and organized the Philippine shipment.

“None of them were endangered… that was all nonsense,” said Parkinson, 75, who has lived in the Philippines since starting the project. “We would never have put them on an island like that if they were endangered.”

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And instead of being a tropical paradise for endangered animals as promoted, the island refuge is fraught with problems.

Inbreeding is a concern because no new animals have been brought in since the first ones arrived 35 years ago, while three species of antelope originally imported have died out, according to Sariego.

Lack of funds

Government budget cuts also mean a skeleton staff of 34 maintain the park, down from more than 300 when Marcos' enthusiasm for the project was at its peak.

"Lack of funds is our biggest challenge," said Sariego, who rose from a government clerk to become park manager during a career spent nearly entirely on the island.

The last of three tractors that were used to clear the tropical vegetation so that the animals could roam unimpeded broke down this year, according to workers on the island.

With no money to repair the tractors, life is becoming particularly hard for the giraffes that have long suffered from bamboo wounds and subsequent infections while trying to graze in unfamiliar vegetation.

Steady killings

Also posing a problem are the villagers who used to live on the island are back, steadily killing off the animals either to eat or sell their meat, or to stop them from eating the villagers' crops.

"Our patrol people are scared to confront them. We are not equipped with weapons," Sariego said.
Standing on a patch of savannah-like land, Sariego retold the story of how the island's biggest giraffe, "Binoy," was lost four years ago.

"Binoy ate the crops of the settlers," Sariego said, referring to the villagers who returned to the island after Marcos was overthrown and who now mostly live as subsistence farmers and fishermen along the coast.

“We found him with a spear in his side. He died eight hours after we found him,” he added.

Another giraffe disappeared in mysterious circumstances this year, according to the park manager.

Settlers blamed

Sariego blamed the settlers for the complete demise of the impala antelope, a few dozen of which had survived on the island until as recently as five or six years ago.

“The settlers could sell the impala meat in the local markets because it could be mixed with Calamian deer,” Sariego said, referring to a local animal that has thrived on Calauit alongside the African beasts.

Dante Dabuit, a community leader, acknowledged there was much frustration among the villagers because the animals had been eating their crops.

“Giraffes cause so much damage. With bananas, once they get at them, there is nothing left for us. They also eat the cashew leaves and our papayas,” Dabuit said. “Even when we put up fences, the giraffes have long necks and they can reach over, or sometimes they just destroy, the fences.”

Nevertheless, Dabuit denied that the villagers, who number about 1,200, killed the animals.
“If the people really wanted to exterminate them, they could hunt them all down in a week. There are not that many of them really,” he said.

Peaceful coexistence

Dabuit also said the villagers had accepted that the African animals were now part of the local environment.

He said the villagers were focused on brokering a deal with the provincial government that would enable the locals and animals to coexist peacefully.

But even if the human-animal conflict is resolved, inbreeding may eventually end the experiment, according to Theresa Mundita Lim, the environment bureau's wildlife chief.

"If they want to continue the existence of the African animals, they would have to do some genetic infusion. It means bringing in more African animals," Lim said.

But Sariego said that, with so little money being spent on the project, he could not envision more animals being imported from Africa.

Opposition

Environment groups would also oppose such a move, according to Michael Dougherty, a Bangkok-based spokesperson for the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the world's biggest green organization.

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